

News focus

Contract wrangles

Feelings of insecurity amongst academic staff on short-term contracts are widespread. The European Union is trying to improve things but there are fears its policies may backfire. **Nigel Williams** reports.

The plight of academic staff hired on short-term contracts, who often have little chance of eventually acquiring a permanent job, is long-standing. Many therefore welcomed the EU's efforts to introduce regulations which obliged employers to offer permanent jobs to most staff after the successful completion of a period of casual contracts. But fears are growing that universities may lay off academics on casual contracts rather than give them permanent jobs to which they are entitled under the European regulations.

European universities have until 2006 to comply with the regulations, which should

improve job security for thousands of academics on fixed-term contracts, including disproportionately more women and people from ethnic minorities.

But part of the problem emerged as Britain's Association of University Teachers (AUT), launched a campaign this autumn to alert universities to the regulations and their responsibilities in ending the present use of fixed-term contracts.

Jane Thompson, the AUT's policy officer, said: "Universities are not doing enough to prepare for this legislation, and there is certainly a fear among casual

workers that they will be made permanently redundant rather than permanent."

She said that any university making staff redundant in this way was in breach of the regulations, which have a 'no detriment' clause.

The fixed-term employees regulations came into force in 2002. They state that after four years on two or more contracts, a fixed-term contract will automatically become permanent — unless the fixed-term element can be 'objectively justified'.

The AUT campaign, known as Security Alert II, has been launched halfway through the period of notice that universities have to implement the regulations, which expires in July 2006.

In all, 48 per cent of female academics and 38 per cent of male academics are on fixed-term contracts, according to the AUT. The situation amongst research staff is more dramatic: nine out of ten researchers in UK universities are employed on short-term contracts and, two years after the introduction of the regulations, 93 per cent of university researchers are still employed on contracts of three years or less.

Sally Hunt, AUT general secretary, said: "The continuing use of fixed-term contracts is a hidden scandal in higher education.

"It is about time universities woke up to their responsibilities. The government changed the law to stop this abuse two years ago, and the universities themselves signed an agreement to reduce the use of fixed-term contracts.

"And two years on, very few universities have reduced their use of fixed-term contracts."

The union and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association have drawn up guidance on the management of these contracts and how to



Future imperfect: Continuing problems for researchers working on casual contracts affect a disproportionate number of women. (Picture: Science Photo Library.)

reduce them. It says: "The aim must be to achieve a proper balance between flexible working and organisational efficiency, on the one hand, and security of employment and fair treatment of employees, on the other."

The AUT's assessment comes at a time of increasing pressure for flexibility by universities in the run-up to the next research assessment exercise in 2008. This exercise estimates the quality of research in every university department and the eventual grade determines the amount of direct research funding the department may win. Many universities are therefore keen to attract top researchers by offering high salaries. This puts increasing pressure on staff at lower grades and on short-term contracts. But in one

proposal at Cambridge University, the heads of three science departments have opposed plans that would offer better salaries for senior academics at the expense of junior and support staff.

Short-term contracts are a particular problem for women. A recent report from the AUT shows that the number of female academics has risen by 43 per cent in the past seven years, while the number of male academics has increased by 4 per cent. Women make up 39 per cent of academics.

The Unequal Academy, provides an analysis of changes in academic staff from 1995–96 to 2002–3, and also shows that the number of women working part-time has almost doubled in seven years from 7,500 to 14,500.

More than a quarter now work part-time. The percentage of men working part-time rose from 9 per cent to 13 per cent.

Forty-eight per cent of female academics are on fixed-term contracts compared with 38 per cent of men. The overall use of fixed-term contracts has risen slightly in the past seven years from 41 per cent to 42 per cent, despite government initiatives aimed at reducing them.

Stephen Court, senior research officer at the AUT and author of the report said: "The report reveals the very different experiences of women and men working in higher education."

And the issue of pay remains a problem. The gap between full-time male and female academics has also widened slightly, to 15 per cent, the report finds.

Hanging for science



Bead works: The Wellcome Trust in London, which recently moved into its new headquarters building, displays its first commissioned artwork for the new building. Constructed by Thomas Heatherwick, the work comprises 150,000 crystal spheres, named Bleigiessen. Although the work may resemble an elongated protein structure, it was named after the traditional German New Year's Eve fortune-telling game involving melting lead and dropping it into water. (Picture: The Wellcome Trust.)